

REVIEWS

THE PHYSICAL PHENOMENA OF MYSTICISM. By Herbert Thurston, S.J. (Burns Oates; 35s.)

The literary executors in the Society of Jesus of the late Herbert Thurston are performing a valuable service to the learned world in editing and reissuing in book form his papers. They have themselves conceded that one of his faults as a scholar was his preference for dealing summarily with his findings in short articles, instead of husbanding them for the major critical works which he could so well have written. The many editors whose journals month by month were enriched by his commentaries must bear their share of responsibility for this. From their publications and from other sources Fr J. H. Crehan, S.J., has gathered a great series of essays dealing with one of his major interests, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*. Here Thurston is displayed to better advantage than in some of his excursions into near-liturgical history; and though this volume must necessarily show a certain lack of connection, it is unified and animated by its revelation of the mind and temper of its author. Few offices are more misunderstood than that of the *promotor fidei*: to the pious he is a perverse and wilful sceptic, to the sceptic the chief actor in a travesty of the processes of law. To those who really wish to understand the spirit in which the *promotor* must come to his task, no better guide than this book could be recommended.

Thurston was probably not by nature a hero-worshipper, but plainly he felt love as well as respect for the personality of Prosper Lambertini, greatest of all the *promotores*, who as Benedict XIII imposed order upon the practice of the Church in canonization, and made to shine afresh the principles of law and veracity which had from early times been honoured in that practice. If Lambertini had seen the evidence and had been convinced by it, that was good enough for Thurston; and in many of his pronouncements and asides we can hear the voices, clear, cool, dry, of his many precursors in the trade of taking nothing upon trust. 'Without disputing the possibility, and even the likelihood, of subsequent interpolations in such a work, I must confess myself frankly distrustful of all attempts to reconstruct the primitive text.' 'Naturally in such a case it is the medical evidence which is of most importance.' 'What I have hesitated to accept is not the fact, but the inference that the fact is miraculous.' As all crime-reporters and character-actors know, there is something irresistibly comic in the spectacle of the trained, dispassionate judicial mind on the hunt (often over unpromising country) for truth; and Thurston on Levitation, Thurston on Human Salamanders, *inter alia*, are first-rate entertainment.

But a judge, if he is not to be hated and feared, must be able to be

moved by pity and compassion; how good a judge Thurston would have been is best shown by the long essay, 'The Case of Mollie Fancher', an account of the life of a Protestant Brooklyn girl of the last century, constantly afflicted by the most cruel physical and mental sufferings, and displaying gifts which, to those who believed in her, could only be of supernatural origin. Without for one moment departing from his most severe standards of judgment, Thurston in this essay tells a most moving story, such as can hardly fail to edify his readers, of the fortitude and humility of this grievously-tried woman, of her refusal to be made an object of curiosity, above all of her unshaken trust in God. Her case provides most valuable evidence for one of his main theses, that the physical phenomena which we associate with the attested miracles of some of the greatest ecstatic saints can be produced by merely psycho-physical causes, notably in hysteric patients; yet for him Mollie Fancher is still not a complex of symptoms to be articulated and indexed, but a gallant, fighting soul.

He has the omniscience of the traditional judge, and his traditional belief that this knowledge is common. To him the obscurer Latin documents in forgotten causes are 'relatively easy of access', because diligent search in the vast resources of the British Museum had led him to them: yet even Thurston has occasion to lament that the documents concerning many canonizations are either unedited, or, worse, relayed to us in pious works written by those for whom the rules of evidence do not exist. How much it is to be regretted that no society exists to undertake for the surviving records of processes what the Bollandists have done in other branches of hagiography, and that still only the enthusiasm of individual scholars has produced such editions. If the work of the great Swedish medievalist Isak Collijn in editing the processes for St Bridget and St Catherine of Sweden, for example, were to be emulated in other countries, how greatly would all historians profit from such labours.

Thurston's own immense reading led him into fields where much was to be gathered. One of the most fascinating chapters of this book is 'Stigmata before St Francis', and is an account of the extraordinary apparition in England in 1222, at a time when most of us think of this country as free from such wild extravagances, of a pseudo-Christ and a pseudo-Mary. All Thurston's conclusions on this affair are marked with sobriety and restraint; it is now for others to relate his observations to their own upon such matters.

At times he stops disappointingly short of what one might expect him to say. One cannot but regret that his absorbing analysis of 'the odour of sanctity' did not lead him to a presentation of some of the evidence for the complementary phenomenon, with which he must have been perfectly familiar, the stench of sinfulness; and although his presentation of the

case of the thirteenth-century hysteric-ecstatic Elizabeth of Herkenrode is valuable (especially when, later in this book, we observe its similarities to that of Teresa Higginson), it is already well reported, and one might have hoped from him for a deeper consideration of some of its peculiar features.

But one must not be ungrateful. No one knew better than he how to strip a topic of its alluring irrelevancies, to refuse to be diverted by minor issues, to find out facts and pronounce upon nothing but them. Another reviewer, writing recently of him, has reminded us of the dictum, 'C'est toujours le devoir des pieux de ne pas scandaliser les savants'. In this work Thurston has drawn for us a comforting portrait of himself as the savant who is unshockable in his learning, unwavering in his piety.

ERIC COLLEDGE

PROGRESS IN THE RELIGIOUS LIFE. By Bernard J. Kelly, C.S.SP., D.D. (Clonmore and Reynolds; 9s. 6d.)

The author of this book is one of the Holy Ghost Fathers. It is so patently written under the inspiration of the Spirit, that this reviewer has no choice but to allow him to speak for himself, by devoting her allotted space to a series of extracts which will summarise the theme of the whole.

'If we but judge according to the idea of religious and the religious life which exists in the mind of God, the normal thing is that religious should make progress with their years of profession, and that, granted the graces which God offers to those whom he favours with a religious vocation, it is, in a very true sense, easier to make progress than not to make it'.

(p. 9.) (All the italics in this review are ours.)

'Many people have a false idea of holiness, and consequently a false notion of what it means to advance in it.' (p. 10.)

'To understand how it is that greater holiness is always possible for the religious, it is necessary to consider first of all that *the religious vocation is a call to growth in perfection, and that this call persists all the years of a person's religious life.*' (p. 11.)

'At no time of his life does God demand of a religious that he should be perfect. On the contrary, by the very fact of calling him to strive after perfection, God declares most unequivocally that he knows that the religious has not perfection as yet, and will be imperfect right up to the end. The one essential thing God asks of a religious is that he strive, that he try. A good religious, a successful religious, a religious after God's own heart, is one who is imperfect and is trying to become less so. The only kind of imperfection which meets with God's disapproval, is that of the religious who is imperfect and who is satisfied to remain imperfect.'

(p. 12.)

'We need never fear our failures: for the religious, as for the Christian,